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LOW WAGES AND THE LOW WAGE ENVIRONMENT

BY FRANK P. WALSH,

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A thought occurs to me as I look about the world and observe the great forces that have been created within the last decade to work for the betterment of mankind. I see great organizations of men and women well equipped, thoroughly provisioned, sufficiently financed and backed by a moral weight such as the world never before saw and has not yet realized. It seems to me that those of us who are earnest and trying to be thorough in our efforts for better things for all have a chance before us such as no other portion of mankind ever before had.

Another thought, however, occurs to me, and that is, that we have a divided army. A common enemy confronts us; a solid phalanx—the allies of sin and suffering, of disease and premature death. But look at our army. We are dressed each in a different uniform. Bad tactics on our part divide our forces. We travel parallel roads. But the movement of our divisions has not taken the formation we desire. We cannot make a frontal attack in force and carry by storm the common breastworks of the enemy.

We have great organizations which are fighting with scientific coolness against disease. We have religious bodies battling zealously for a purer life for us all. We have hosts of women struggling for the ballot in order to give more certain and definite aid to us. We have great philanthropies engaged in an effort against distress. We have many agencies which are making war on the evils of mankind. But we fight, paired off, as it were, religion against sin, science against disease, social justice against false economics, philanthropy against suffering. Such is the line-up for the fray.

Let us have a new declaration of war and a grand mobilization! I hold that every organization we have for good should strike a blow at the main offender—

Low wages and the resultant indecent standard of living for a thinking and toiling race!

We should unite all our agencies of betterment and reform and make an attack in force on this common enemy.

The victims of sin and suffering, disease and premature death are merely the dead and wounded in the great struggle for existence.

When we divide our forces into three great battalions: those working for better economic conditions, those working for better social conditions, and those working for better moral conditions, we make a monumental blunder. Lines cannot be drawn between the economic, social and moral life of the people. They rise or fall together and economic conditions always dominate. The greatest influence on life is produced by environment. The only factor which enters into environment is the economic factor. The income of a family absolutely determines its place of living, its manner of living and its interpretation of life. Persons will vary in mental type, in breadth of vision, in clarity of view, in outlook on life and its hopes and destinies. That is inevitable. But these, too, are tempered by environment.

The Economic Factor

So well recognized is this fact that while the thought may strike us as semi-new, it is one that everybody realizes. You have no hesitation in saying that there are various classes. What are classes? They are human beings of various strata. They actually dwell on plateaus of various heights, according to popular and universal conception. Why? Simply because of the economic factor in the lives of the various classes. Each takes on the color of its class according to its income. The economic factor decides for each class the texture and value of its clothing, the quality of its food, its place of residence, its associates, its tastes, its amusements; indeed, every outward aspect of life is lived practically the same way by each individual in each class. And the economic factor enters more largely into the mental aspects of the individual than it does into his physical aspects. His belonging to any of the various classes practically determines for him his views on morals, sociology, sin, and suffering. If you will analyze your views, you will find that they practically coincide with those of persons of your own class.

This class feeling is so strong that it breaks down the mental and moral fiber of the individual. You will note among your own friends who have had the misfortune or fortune to rise or fall from one class to another, an entirely changed set of opinions about every

matter that vitally concerns society. They no longer hold the opinions they had while a member of another class, but consciously or unconsciously assume the mental colors and hold aloft the class flag of their new fellows.

The point I am trying to make is that if those who are concerned with social and moral betterment would join in with those of us who are primarily concerned with establishing economic justice; if they would help to force better wages, a decent standard of living, a better environment, more leisure and less laborious situations, on ninety per cent of the people, we could cut their work at least in half.

I agree with Henry Ford to this extent: That the sane and well nurtured person is instinctively good and primarily honest. He may be the victim of greed and forced to the same attitude as that used by his oppressors, but that is usually because he is economically powerless and forced to go with the tide.

We should begin the new warfare by getting our conceptions "on straight." At present we have a veneration for wealth in this country that has made concrete wealth supra-legal. It has usurped powers to itself that in the course of generations have become practically recognized by the great public as belonging to it. The first principle is shown in the law allowing a man to engage in a business and wrest his profits, not from the business, but from what should be the just earnings of his employees. We look with as much pride and envy on the man of wealth who has literally starved his employees and brought about a degenerate and subnormal new generation as we do on the man who has amassed a fair competency and at the same time given to those working with him an honest share of the profits of the enterprise. We regard with greater admiration the so-called captain of industry who has shot his way to tremendous riches through the ranks of his employees than he who has gained economic independence by an invention which has lightened toil and sweetened life.

New Maxim for Society

What we need is a saner appreciation of the facts of life. We have a perfect right to withhold the protection of organized society, in its governmental or legal function, from one man who is doing many of us hurt. The old maxim of "the greatest good to the greatest number" has been recast into the idea that the powers of

government should be exercised or withheld for the greatest good to the least and weakest of mankind. If this new concept breaks down the methods by which enormous fortunes are secured, the world is better served. Great fortunes are as active a menace in themselves as they are to their possessors. They lead to greater and greater travesties on justice and a more insane vision of power by those who control them. They are gold gone mad with lust of conquest. The owners of such fortunes must have, indubitably, at some time or the other crossed the line of true economics, ethics, equity and the criminal law. An enormous fortune is a wrong proved by itself.

Those guilty of economic abuses for gain may be divided into these classes: Those who, by corruption and other devious means, secure franchises and special privileges of various sorts to exploit entire communities and whole sections of the country; the men who, by similar methods, secure a grip upon land and other natural resources, the common inheritance of all, to selfishly exploit the same, or hold it away from the beneficial use of their fellow-man; the men who work thousands of other men in dangerous and unhealthful factories and mines; the men who employ women and children in unhealthful occupations, or in insanitary workshops; the exploiting employers who impose upon their helpless workers long hours at wages which will not allow for that sweet contentment of mind which makes of labor a joy; the man who sells decayed or adulterated food; the man who robs his own employees of the product of their toil and gives away the money in showy benefactions and stupendous foundations; the men who through organizations, whether termed benevolent, commercial, employers' or what not, combine to coerce and browbeat other men in their effort to organize and obtain by concert of action a just length of work day, decent conditions and compensatory wages; the bankers and financiers who foster "watered" stocks and force employees of large industries to work for low wages because the earning power of the companies has been absorbed in advance; and last, but by no means least, that large class of lickspittles who have little or nothing themselves, but side in with and work for bad conditions, because they get, or vaguely hope to get, a moiety of the general stealage.

Worst of All Reactionaries

The latter class is so large and their combined efforts so vitally assist in keeping alive rotten social and industrial conditions, that they deserve to rank ahead of several of the divisions first named. They are the oft-dubbed "Little Brothers of the Rich"—usually visionless clerks, briefless lawyers and so-called "leaders of thought," who ought to be butlers. To them every protest against wrong is "demagogic." They "view with alarm" the socialistic tendencies of our times, and the "growing disrespect of the people for vested rights." Usually upon meager salaries themselves, hopelessly submerged, but submissive and servile, they are the product of false teaching, mean ambition, lack of thought, personal weakness, and victims, generally, of circumstances beyond their control. Because so many of them are not conscious of wrongdoing is the only reason I have for placing them among the minor offenders.

Such men as form these various divisions are the voluntary offenders against economic justice and the laws of the land. They make a profit, or hope to, or help to through bad economics and violated laws.

But look at the other side of the economic ledger. There you will find the millions who are the victims of these profit-mongers and law-breakers,—the involuntary offenders. They are the thieves, harlots, the weak, the deficient, the men and women badly poised mentally through shameful environment and poor food, stretched over generations, the near-zeros of civilization; the maimed, the crippled, the blind, the hereditary victims of disease and vicious habits, children of parents whose labor sapped them of the strength that should go to endow a future generation with a good brain and an adequate body; victims of drink who unavailingly have tried to snatch a few golden moments out of a gray world; children crippled in the streets and factories because organized society has not yet reached the plane where it adequately cares for its young; the survivors of war and the wretched victims of financial panics who have suffered because big moneyed men know that a money scare ever so often shatters values and makes it profitable to buy what others must sell to live.

I call all of this last named class involuntary offenders, because they drop naturally into that class through economic pressure and

environment. Many of them, of course, are not truly involuntary victims, but there is that in their makeup and in the breeding they have had that causes them to sink rather than dash themselves again and again against the harsh line-up of forces which life has presented to them.

I do not believe that anyone can study at first hand conditions as they exist today, and by these I mean the every-day facts of life as they affect the economic condition of mankind, and not thrill with the zeal of the proselyte in the cause of a better day. I believe that you can't reach a man's soul, any more than his heart, except through his stomach. It is positively shameful to hurl a "Thou shall not steal" at a hungry or ragged human being.

Let us all dress and have dinner before we talk of morals.

An element in life that has far-reaching consequences is that we are apt to live merely by comparison. We take as a matter of course the crowded East Sides, the Hell's Half Acres, and the other strikingly named districts in our big cities. We don't seek out reasons nor hunt for solvents. We see them from the time we are able to toddle until we die, without a proper emotion nor a sense—a gripping vital sense—that something is wrong. We regard them with the fearful complacency with which black death, diphtheria, smallpox and other dangerous diseases were regarded in by-gone days, as something inevitable and in accord with life.

The East Sides and the Hell's Half Acres are the foulest blots on civilization. They advertise that injustices and menaces to the health and well-being of communities are tolerated for the sake of profit. They show that property is in the saddle riding down human life. They prove that the tenants, giving up their lives in toil, cannot earn enough to be decently housed. And we stand for the sort of living they must have and the kind of wages they must take.

Shorter Course Charted

In placing economic conditions before moral questions, I do not intend to belittle the wonderful work that has been done in the world to help the unfortunate and to place obstacles in the way of those who would profit through the prostitution of men and women by trafficking in their frailties. It is to the glory of our race that thousands of men and women have gone out of their way to take part in this task, as arduous and thankless as any person

could essay. I am merely trying to point out that it is my belief that their objective is in much easier reach. I am trying to chart for them what I believe to be a shorter course to their haven. We know, as rational beings, that human misery, so universal as that caused by poor wages and viciously sinful hours of toil, is infinitely worse than the result of any individual's moral lapse or folly, degrading and vile though it may make the victim appear.

Napoleon said that an army marched on its stomach. He meant that it was only good for severe taxing of its strength as long as its larder was filled. He might have said it with equal truth of the entire race of men. The poorly nourished are weak comrades in a war on rotten industrial conditions, adulterated foods, vice, wholesale murder, or any other of those countless evils that have an economic basis.

Does this sound pessimistic? I hope not, for I am optimism incarnated. I believe the world is getting better every day. I believe more and more every day that a greater number of persons are becoming genuinely interested in the well-being of humanity than ever before, some from personal reasons, but more from that divine fire which a pure and undefiled love for even the lowliest of us inspires.

Some one has said there is more of the Christ spirit in the world today than ever before. The very aims that the honest battlers for the right under their different flags aspire to show that there is a mighty undercurrent—a soul movement, if you will have it that way—that is making for better things.

Let us fight for all the good we may achieve—whether religious, economic, social, moral; but I believe that every sincere soul should line up with every other sincere soul in a fight to a finish to lift from the world the weight of agony caused by insufferable conditions resulting from *low wages, the crux of bad economics*.